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THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT TO AN OBJECT OF EMPIRICAL INQUIRY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1939

By

EDWIN RUTHVEN WALKER

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In concluding this study of the problem of religious commitment to an object of empirical inquiry, it is necessary to bring together the results of the various phases of the study and interpret them. Although the concluding section in the treatment of each phase in successive chapters has summarized the results of that particular phase, it is essential that we now relate these one to another and treat the results as a whole. In summarizing these results we will not consider it necessary to indulge in the repetition that would be involved in a review of the details of the investigations, nor will specific citations be made to them. Our concern is to interpret the meaning of the results when taken as a whole.

The investigations that compose the second and third chapters were required to define the problem adequately. These inquiries went beyond a definition of the problem in so far as they resulted in the development of the principal tools for pursuing the investigation.

The survey of the history of the idea of religious commitment in Christian thought and the review of representative psychological treatments of this element in religious living had both a negative and a positive aspect as results. Negatively considered these studies revealed the fact that neither area is a source for a definition of religious commitment on which there is unanimous agreement. On the positive side, we were able to recognize in these studies the basic elements in such a definition, the principal considerations involved, and some of the factors that accounted for the differences observed. Using these results as indicators and controls, a definition was stated and analyzed which was taken as normative for this thesis: Religious commitment at its highest and best is a decision to give oneself completely and devotedly, in desire, attitude, and action, to God in terms of the work of God in the world of one's experience.

The lack of a widely known statement of the nature of the empirical method commonly recognized as valid in contemporary philosophic literature made it impossible for us to refer to the method unambiguously without developing our own formulation of it. Avoiding the repetition of detailed considerations developed in the third chapter, we may recall the essential characteristics of that treatment. It is a method common to the sciences as well as philosophy, but it is not to be confused with the particular techniques of operation in the several sciences. It is a method of getting knowledge by way of developing a hypothetical proposition to explain a body of observed facts, deducing the implications of the hypothesis, and testing these implied propositions by means of further observation. The method can deal only with observable events and their relations, and is thus empirical. Its procedures involve processes of formal reason, also, and it should be understood as a "rational-empiricism" or "modified empiricism." There are limitations upon the degree of verification possible within this method, consequently there is a tentative quality in all knowledge derived by means of it. Further, the study of the relation of a bias to the use of the empirical method showed that it was impossible to eliminate an element of bias in any application and, though this may be more acute in religious inquiry than in some other areas, there are means of dealing with a bias so that it need not invalidate the results of the inquiry, but, on the contrary, it may actually contribute to knowledge.

The definition of religious commitment and an analysis of that definition revealed that there is an indispensable intellectual element in religious commitment. Therefore, the problem of the adequacy of a method of getting knowledge which will serve as a basis for religious commitment may be reduced to more specific form in terms of four requirements on the use of the method in this relation. These requirements are: first, it must be applicable in gaining a specific present grasp of the nature of the work of the religious object; second, the object so known must be worthy of complete and devoted commitment of oneself; third, the method must yield assurance that the concepts which constitute knowledge of the object of devotion are not illusory; finally, it must be a method that will permit growth in knowledge. So the problem is defined: can the empirical method, as we have defined that method,

be used in an inquiry concerning an object of religious commitment in a way that will meet these four requirements?

This question might be answered negatively or it might receive three forms of a positive answer: yes, but it is inferior to alternative methods; yes, it is equally adequate in comparison with alternative methods; yes, and it meets the requirements for adequacy more effectively than alternative methods. We have followed a procedure in our treatment that will permit an unequivocal answer to this question. By examining criticisms of the method and by using the method in an inquiry of our own we have determined that the answer is positive. By examining five alternative methods in contemporary writings and by the results of our own inquiry we have determined that the empirical method meets these requirements more effectively than any other method.

The criticisms were considered by classifying them into thirteen types, analyzing them, and evaluating them. These forms are too widely diverse to permit summary. By reference to the fourth chapter it will be recalled that each of these criticisms was either refuted, or shown to be a characteristic of all conceptual knowledge, or shown to be based on a misconception of the nature of empirical inquiry, or shown to depend upon a conception of religious commitment which we do not accept. Thus criticisms that have been advanced against the use of empirical method as means of inquiry concerning the object of religious commitment do not require a negative answer to the question that is the central problem of this thesis.

The result of our investigation of the alternative methods was a demonstration that each of them failed to meet the requirements of adequacy implied by the nature of religious commitment. Each of them was found less adequate than the empirical method in clarity, certainty, and provision for further discovery.

The application of our method in an inquiry concerning the existence and nature of God, proved the adequacy of the method in relation to each of the four requirements. This inquiry resulted in an apprehension of the work of God in thd world; it proved that the nature of God thus known is worthy of man's complete and devoted loyalty since it was shown that the work of God is inclusive of all lesser goods; the order of certainty resulting from the use of this method was shown to be greater than that of any other me-

thod; and, the method permits growth in apprehension of God since it provides a means of taking into account all new facts discovered.

A synthesis of the results of this study yields the conclusion that religious commitment may be given to God as he is known by empirical inquiry.

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